DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 344 EC 200 281

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TITLE The Dialectic of Special Education: Postscript to a Radical Analysis.
PUB DATE Dec 86
NOTE 10p.; For related document, see ED 273 077.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; Educational Policy; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Identification; Incidence; Individualized Instruction; *Learning Disabilities; *Mild Disabilities; Social Influences; Sociocultural Patterns; *Student Placement
IDENTIFIERS Education for All Handicapped Children Act

ABSTRACT

The author elaborates on his own ideas and the reactions of other professionals to his earlier work, "A Radical Perspective on the Development of American Special Education with a Focus on the Concept of Learning Disabilities." A narrow reliance on psychology and medicine has contributed to current policy crises regarding identification of students as mildly handicapped. Public Law 94-142 mandates that the federal government provide much of the funding for special education, and this has driven most of today's so-called mildly handicapped into special programs. While learning disabilities of neurological genesis do exist, the learning disabilities (LD) classification includes underachievers without any contributing medical history. The regular education community may become increasingly unwilling or unable to cope with those who deviate from some average expectation for social and academic performance. Assessment and intervention should be integrally related. The mildly handicapped should receive remedial instead of special education, or more attentive in-class (individualized) instruction. In this way we can move towards delimiting the LD, and other mildly handicapped, populations while serving those truly in need of special help. Special education can then be directed away from serving society's need to control populations and toward maximizing everyone's potential and opportunity. (JW)

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The Dialectic of Special Education: Postscript to a Radical Analysis*

by Dr. Scott B. Sigmon

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*For background information see S. B. Sigmon's "A radical perspective on the development of American special education with a focus on the concept of 'learning disabilities' " (ERIC/EDRS order number ED 273 077/EC 190 272; 177 pages; work completed October 1985 and abstract resume appeared in the January 1987 issue of "Resources in Education").

EC 200 281

I do not believe any analysis, no matter how lengthy, is ever really complete or contains the last word on a topic; and this is especially true when dealing with subjects that are, for the most part, social constructions. Both special education and learning disabilities (LD) are such constructions of reality. Nevertheless, I believe this analysis was crafted in a manner which well explained the facts from a radical--and my personal--perspective. It is complete to my satisfaction. Yet, for those who believe this work is either incomplete or not radical enough, there are several items which naturally could and should be addressed--for those previously familiar or not with American special education's development, and regardless of their social philosophy.

After having learnt about my perspective on special education, the reaction by scholars (i.e., university professors) and school practitioners is almost always blatant hostility or outright praise. As far as I know, my work on special education, at this point in historical time, always elicits an emotional response from those close to the field. And because of this lack of neutrality, I consider my work a success--as I aimed at controversy to stimulate change in hard-held positions and practices. It is unsettling for many in special education to consider the questions I raise about the social purposes of the field and the nature of LD. But please keep in mind at stake are the lives and careers of children, which is why I examined the field so carefully. When I first began this project, I had a gut-feeling that most today in special education are wrongly schooled, but I am absolutely convinced of this now.

American special education research and practice tends not to be well informed by scholarship in history, sociology, or political economics. The narrow reliance on psychology and medicine for concepts, theories, and investigative models has limited scholarly development of this field, and probably has contributed to our current policy crises regarding identification of students as mildly handicapped (i.e., read mainly "learning disabled"). The historical perspective is desperately lacking in special education. Through it I was able not only to weave in the effects of cultural and sociopolitical factors, but also to uncover some forgotten roots which affect current wide-spread thought and practice. Regarding the latter, perhaps the most important is the link from remedial education to the development of theories in learning disabilities. Moreover, the use of IQ tests to place children into special education tracks was shown not to be a recent phenomenon--many blacks as well as southern and eastern Europeans, who migrated to the northern United States in the early 20th century, had the dubious fate of being among the first. This is becoming more widely known. A radical analysis involves pointing out that tracking, under the guise of special education was: institutionalized early on a massive scale, had insidious effects on the futures of the individual students to the extent that they had their economic chances reduced, and only during relatively recent times has litigation against such practices been initiated. All too often special education writing too narrowly focuses on its own current research and becomes isolated--even from practices in other areas of education.

Perhaps it was not emphasized enough within the analysis the role of a national statute entitled "Public Law 94-142" (PL94-142), also called "The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975." PL94-142 not only guaranteed educational rights, but civil rights as well. Having established by legislation

that all handicapped had a right to free appropriate education, due process procedures, described in the Act, sought to provide a litigative potential in the event that states or local educational agencies continued to fail to provide equal access to education, and, more subtly, to provide parents and others with a quasi-judicial procedure to respond to such things as: (a) culture-fairness in testing, (b) multiple measures related to the suspected handicap, (c) a specific provision to avoid excessive reliance on a single professional group (a multidisciplinary evaluation), (d) least restrictive (educational) environment provisions, and (e) mainstreaming. The combined protections afforded via due process and through parent involvement and parent education, also required by law, were intended to insure that, to the extent possible, implementation of the Act would include informed consent of parents--if such can be legislated. A great humanitarian effort was expended by PL94-142's proponents--primarily parent and professional advocacy groups, such as the Council for Exceptional Children--in guiding its passage. Their intent was to first enfranchise the unserved and then the underserved exceptional child. The Act also mandates the federal government provide much of the funding for special education, and, unfortunately, this has been the engine driving most of today's so-called mildly handicapped into special programs. PL94-142 has become a very sharp and swift dual-edged sword.

The lack of clarity and purpose in the area of learning disabilities is extremely detrimental to the valid special education efforts with moderately to severely handicapped students. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the existence of mass confusion over the definition of LD, and this was why LD's roots were explored--and found to be in medicine. In any event, the proliferation of LD classes is unethical and a self-defeating activity.

I cannot stress more strongly that I do believe learning disabilities (LD) of neurological genesis exist. In my own school practice there have been a number of true LD students; i.e., those with obvious average intellect who have learning problems which were traced to some medical-related problem--prenatal illness; birth problem; postnatal disease, injury, illness; or a genetic disorder. The problem with the LD classification in particular is its inclusion of underachievers without any contributing medical history.

One of my most important points in this book was to demonstrate a relationship between the student who is an educational resister and the usage of the special education apparatus. Whether the curriculum is unrelated to the learner's needs is less important than whether education responds to the uncooperative through punitive use of special education. The use of special programs for students labeled socially maladjusted and emotionally disturbed is the obvious response--I do not believe most of these two types are severely clinically pathological to warrant such labels or segregation. A more subtle punitive use of special placement is through the LD or mildly or educable mentally retarded (EMR) programs.

The regular education community runs the risk of becoming increasingly unwilling or unable to cope with those who are divergent from some average expectation for social and academic performance in schools. This latter item is critical to a radical analysis as it points the way to a major social dilemma in the not too distant future. Specifically, the day may come, left unchecked, when special education will be asked to serve all children below the fiftieth percentile! Obviously, ordinary education must develop accommodations in response to children with learning difficulties.

The history of inclusion and exclusion of atypical children in public schools

and in private institutions has evolved steadily from gross assessments of physical, mental and emotional adequacies and inadequacies to a heavy reliance on procedures and evaluations--psychometric, psycholinguistic, perceptual as well as projective--designed to sort, rank and classify children for special education placement. The role of such inferential psychological test instruments has become imbedded in social, cultural and political forces which I challenge as invalid and indefensible in meeting the needs of children whose learning styles, abilities and aptitudes are different enough to require nontraditional teaching techniques and administrative accommodations. Despite my harsh criticism of current testing practice and my philosophic preference for no formal student testing but rather only educating, I know even in the most humane advanced societies--the latter may be a paradox--pupil evaluation of some sort is necessary to maintain order. Furthermore, aside from the anxiety it may cause, assessment need not be inherently nefarious--provided its use is well intentioned; i.e., to ensure quality education, and not merely to help control a youngster in the institution known as school. Both education and schooling are processes, but quite different types. Educating is to enable a student to develop thinking skills and, hopefully, useful facts. Schooling is, in the main, a custodial form of socialization among other lesser purposes. The point is assessment should be designed not merely for classification and placement purposes, but rather to determine what needs to be done to improve the learning of atypical children in an instructional setting. I agree with the intent of PL94-142 that all aspects of the child's cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic and linguistic environment need to be evaluated.

This work has been concerned more with form, educational arrangements and overall practices, as opposed to content, methods of instruction or theories of

learning. Thus, in an overall way to bridge this gap, I maintain that assessment and intervention (instruction) should be integrally related. Moreover, the mildly handicapped should receive remedial instead of special education, or better yet, more attentive in-class (individualized) instruction. In this way we can move towards delimiting the LD, and other mildly handicapped, populations while serving those truly in need of special help in school. Having done this, special education can be directed away from serving society's need to control populations and towards maximizing everyone's potential and opportunity. I feel all of this was implicit throughout my radical analysis of special education; yet perhaps I am at fault for not being more explicit on these key topics within it. One final note along these lines: There are those who might be disappointed about my omission of instructional techniques; but as important as they are to any discussion on education, it was not my intention to include them as I was really more concerned over the larger area which is the sociology of special education.

Even though a serious situation exists with the overrepresentation of minority group members in American special education programs, I deliberately chose to do little direct analysis along this line for two reasons. First of all, there were several places wherein the actual U.S. government figures were noted indicating how rather high the number of minorities is in special education. Moreover, and quite importantly, the relationship of minority concerns, especially those of blacks, to changes in special education was discussed. Secondly, because minority and recent immigrant status usually relegate people to lower socioeconomic status, I approached my topic, special education, from a <u>social class</u>, rather than a race/ethnic, perspective in keeping with a Marxian model. Thus, cultural bias is merely taken as a given against minorities--who are usually

poor.

While there are some who find comfort in the fact that more minority students are now labeled LD rather than mildly or educable mentally retarded (EMR), I do not. Nor do I advocate labeling them anything at all--other than people with human needs--in order that their schools might receive the more readily available special education bounty. Schools with poor children, predominantly minority or not, should receive additional monies without first stigmatizing their students. This is why I wrote the book!

The very important concept of control requires some discussion to avoid confusion. I take the position whereby controlling simply is managing a student. It is a fact, attending an ordinary classroom requires a great deal of conformity to rules of decorum as well as achievement. At the same time, in most cases, the behavioral and academic standards for special classes/schools are lower. Inasmuch as compulsory attendance laws require students to attend school, special education makes it easier to manage those who do not or cannot conform. Control in this sense certainly does not mean making unreasonable demands or being removed from the system. On the contrary, control through special educational tracks keeps the nonconformist in the school system--and under supervision. The issue is, however, in this way, How much does the student benefit? Special education, then, becomes a convenient way for regular education teachers or administrators to get rid of youngsters who are difficult to teach or manage.

It has been written that good philosophy raises more questions than it answers. With this work, after having done a radical analysis of special education, one primary question comes to mind: Where do we go from here? This is obviously a situation in which a straightforward question necessitates a complex

response. Yet, for the sake of parsimony, I should like to suggest that the solutions to special education's major problem, policy, reside outside education. School policy usually reflects conflicts in the larger society. Ergo, there is no doubt that the problem is more sociopolitical (systemic) than educational. The quest to educate the handicapped on the one hand and the mission of the schools to conserve culture regardless of the psychic costs to children on the other, ensures a perverted overall policy for special education.

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December 1986